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Tuesday, October 24, 2017

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1 — West Texas Refinery Set to Break Ground in November, 10/17/17
http://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/energy-environment/2017/10/23/243921/west-texas-refinery-set-to-break-ground-in-november/
The nation's first new oil refinery in decades could be coming to West Texas. It's a plan to cash in on growing oil production, but some doubt it will actually happen. Jack Hanks is the man behind the plan. He's CEO of MMEX Resources, at an empty patch of desert near Fort Stockton, Texas, where Hanks plans to build a 10,000 barrels-a-day refinery. He noted an old railroad is nearby.

2 — In the shadows of Refinery Row, a parable of redevelopment and race, Washinton Post, 10/21/17
http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/local/2017/10/21/in-the-shadows-of-refinery-row-a-parable-of-redevelopment-and-race/?utm_term=.ed6797e1ceef
The cranes are in place to build a mammoth new bridge over the shipping channel here. The span will be anchored by two Washington Monument-size spires that will be taller than the nearby flame-tipped refinery towers. The $500 million bridge, with a higher clearance and a deeper channel, will let supersize oil tankers push into the inner harbor, spurring industrial growth and uncorking the port's potential as a petrochemical trading hub.

3 — EPA plans to repeal emission standards for truck components, Washington Post, 10/18/17
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/epa-may-repeal-emission-standards-for-truck-components/2017/10/23/993170a0-b814-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-more-top-stories_epa-350pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.63d0e7f2da42
The Environmental Protection Agency is seeking to repeal tighter emissions standards for truck components, a rule adopted in the final months of the Obama administration aimed at controlling traditional air pollutants as well as greenhouse-gas emissions linked to climate change.

4 — Houston Could Learn Something From Austin About Managing Stormwater, Bloomberg, 10/23/17
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-23/houston-could-learn-something-from-austin-about-managing-stormwater
Austin is already ahead of Houston in its approach to stormwater runoff, and it may be about to extend its lead. The Texas capital is working on a rewrite of its building code that, if passed by the city council next year, would require that most rain be absorbed where it falls instead of running off and causing problems elsewhere.

5 — Here's why SAWS rate increases are necessary, San Antonio Express News, 10/23/17
http://www.expressnews.com/opinion/editorials/article/Here-s-why-SAWS-rate-increases-are-necessary-12300260.php
No one likes rate increases. But here's the tough reality for San Antonio Water System ratepayers: The rate increases are paying for the sins of the past as well as our future water security.

Under an Environmental Protection Agency consent decree, SAWS is required to invest $500 million in additional infrastructure improvements to fix sewage leaks across the system. Much of the rate increases the public has experienced in recent years is tied to this work. This includes proposed rate increases of 5.8 percent in 2018 and 4.7 percent in 2019.

6 — GAO: Climate change already costing US billions in losses, Star-telegram, 10/23/17
http://www.star-telegram.com/news/state/texas/article180510066.html
A non-partisan federal watchdog says climate change is already costing U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars each year, with those costs expected to rise as devastating storms, floods, wildfires and droughts become more frequent in the coming decades. A Government Accountability Office report released Monday said the federal government has spent more than $350 billion over the last decade on disaster assistance programs and losses from flood and crop insurance. That tally does not include the massive toll from this year's three major hurricanes and wildfires, expected to be among the most costly in the nation's history.

7 — Digging In The Mud To See What Toxic Substances Were Spread By Hurricane Harvey, KSTX, 10/23/17
http://tpr.org/post/digging-mud-see-what-toxic-substances-were-spread-hurricane-harvey
The floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey had to go somewhere. The storm dumped 50 inches of rain on parts of the Houston area in late August. Much of the water made its way through streets and bayous and eventually drained into the Houston Ship Channel, the busy commercial waterway that allows ships to travel between the Gulf of Mexico and industrial facilities around Houston.

8 — Digging In The Mud To See What Toxic Substances Were Spread By Hurricane Harvey, Houston Public Media, 10/23/17
https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/2017/10/23/244161/digging-in-the-mud-to-see-what-toxic-substances-were-spread-by-hurricane-harvey/
Hurricane Harvey dumped 50 inches of rain on parts of Houston. Scientists are now trying to identify contaminants spread by the storm, including those in mud at the bottom of the Houston Ship Channel.

9 — Oklahoma's Kickapoo Tribe Gets More Than $282k From EPA, US News, 10/23/17
https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/oklahoma/articles/2017-10-23/oklahomas-kickapoo-tribe-gets-more-than-282k-from-epa
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has awarded the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma more than $282,000 to curb water pollution. The McLoud-based tribe will use the grant to control surface and groundwater pollution and establish protection programs that address indoor air, underground storage tanks and solid and hazardous waste management.

10 — The Empire Strikes Back: Monsanto Sues Arkansas Over Dicamba Restrictions; Meanwhile, the EPA Gives Farmers the Green Light to Use New Dicamba Formulation, Trofire, 10/23/17
https://trofire.com/2017/10/23/empire-strikes-back-monsanto-sues-arkansas-dicamba-restrictions-meanwhile-epa-gives-farmers-green-light-use-new-dicamba-formulation/
Less than a month after the Arkansas Plant board approved a proposal to institute an annual five-month ban on the use of dicamba effective next April, Monsanto has filed a lawsuit in Pulaski County Circuit Court, seeking an injunction against enforcement of the new rule. Coincidentally, this lawsuit was filed only a week after the EPA announced that it will continue to allow farmers to use the controversial herbicide on Monsanto's new dicamba-resistant GMO cotton and soybeans. According to Monsanto's complaint.

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

West Texas Refinery Set to Break Ground in November

A local environmental group is closely watching the plan.

TRAVIS BUBENIK | OCTOBER 23, 2017, 1:17 PM

Travis Bubenik

Jack Hanks, CEO of MMEX Resources, displays a map of an old rail line he says will be used to transport refined oil and gas products to Mexico from West Texas.

00:03 /01:09

The nation's first new oil refinery in decades could be coming to West Texas.

It's a plan to cash in on growing oil production, but some doubt it will actually happen.

Jack Hanks is the man behind the plan. He's CEO of MMEX Resources, at an empty patch of desert near Fort Stockton, Texas, where Hanks plans to build a 10,000 barrels-a-day refinery. He noted an old railroad is nearby.

"Primarily, we're interested in exporting refined products to western Mexico, or around on the railroad back to the Texas Gulf areas," Hanl

He has the land and a permit from state regulators, but this, he said would just be a first phase of the project.

"We would like to call this a proof of concept, that we get our supply chain of crude oil working," Hanks said.

A local environmental group is closely watching the plan.

"There would and there should be air quality concerns," said Coyne Gibson, a volunteer and member of the Big Bend Conservation Alliar

"If you're taking large quantities of refined hydrocarbons south on a sketchy railroad, the communities that that train rolls through should a concerns."

Still, Gibson said he's "highly skeptical" of the plan. The railroad, for starters, needs significant repairs. But MMEX said it will break grour month.

Travis Bubenik

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Travis Bubenik reports on the tangled intersections of energy and the environment in Houston and across Texas. A Hc native and proud Longhorn, he returned to the Bayou City after serving as the Morning Edition Host & Reporter for Ma Public Radio in Far West Texas. Bubenik was previously the...

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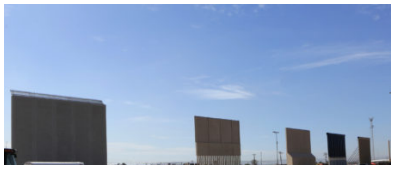

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In the shadows of Refinery Row, a parable of redevelopment and race

CORPUS CHRISTI, Tex.

The cranes are in place to build a mammoth new bridge over the shipping channel here. The span will be anchored by two Washington Monument-size spires that will be taller than the nearby flame-tipped refinery towers.

The $500 million bridge, with a higher clearance and a deeper channel, will let supersize oil tankers push into the inner harbor, spurring industrial growth and uncorking the port's potential as a petrochemical trading hub.

Add in new pipelines nearby, and crude-oil exports are projected to triple by 2024, an increase worth at least $36 billion a year for a port that already provides more than 13,000 jobs.

neighborhood of Hillcrest. It is squeezed between the port and the interstate, hemmed in by oil tanks on one side and miles of refineries on another.

The bridge, as designed, would complete the isolation of the neighborhood, which is predominantly Hispanic and African American. And that, two residents argued in a complaint filed with the federal Transportation Department, would be a violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Massive infrastructure projects inevitably present challenges to adjoining communities that historically have taken years, and even decades, to sort out. In Hillcrest, however, homeowners are being offered two or three times the depressed value of their homes to move out, a remarkably generous deal — and a surprisingly quick resolution.

Can that agreement serve as a model for a new president who has vowed to slash through the red tape of big projects to prod economic development? Or will it stand as an uncommon example of progress on civil rights, housing and the environment?

Just beside the port, Rosie Ann Porter stood on the back deck of a house that will soon be gone from a neighborhood that is dying. Her sturdy home, with its 17 windows and airy rooms, is one of fewer than 500 residences left in impoverished Hillcrest.

The blocks of once-neat houses, with the good candy on Halloween and the grapefruit trees in the yards, gave a couple of generations of oil workers a place to live close to work — and exposure to carcinogens for decades.

“Murder,” Porter said, referring to the refineries at the end of her street. “They’ve gotten away with murder. That’s what I think.”

From a boat in the shipping channel, in the warm sunset glow, there’s a certain imposing beauty to Refinery Row. It looks like a chemistry set left out by giants.

Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. Citgo gasoline goes to its network of thousands of service stations.

But decades of emissions, leaks and explosions have left Hillcrest's residents distrustful and complaining of serious health problems.

"You can't let your windows up and enjoy a fresh breeze coming through the house," said Porter, a retired helicopter parts supplier. "When they're up and the refinery's spilling out those fumes, it's nothing nice." She stopped eating her grapefruit years ago.

Her daughter grew up with severe asthma, which Porter blames on refinery emissions. As a girl, Therri Alexandria Usher assumed that her frequent nosebleeds and near-yearly bouts of bronchitis were routine parts of growing up, just like the towering stacks a few blocks away.

"I thought that was where God made clouds, because I would see the smoke coming out of the big poles," said Usher, 28, a statistician for the federal government who lives in Columbia, Md. "When you're growing up there, you think of it as normal, really."

A federal jury found Citgo guilty of criminal violations of the Clean Air Act in 2007 and fined the company $2 million, but an appeals court overturned the verdict in 2015, citing a botched jury instruction.

That left the people of Hillcrest with no compensation — and still "breathing a mixture of chemicals found in Refinery Row outdoor air" that over many years "increases the risk of a cancer," as the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry put it in a 456-page public health assessment last year.

Then came what residents thought was the final blow: the big bridge project. Its design included a new section of highway that would box in Hillcrest on all four sides.

Residents were used to losing against powerful oil interests. But a civil rights lawyer urged Porter and an elderly neighbor, Jean Salone, now deceased, to file a complaint with

Lawyers Erin Gaines of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid and Kelly Haragan at the University of Texas School of Law wrote in the 2015 filing that the state "continues to perpetuate past discrimination against African Americans in the historically segregated Hillcrest neighborhood," a community that "has already borne disproportionate environmental and health impacts" from building Interstate 37 in the 1960s and decades of encroaching industry.

They wagered that their legal argument would help persuade President Barack Obama's transportation secretary, Anthony Foxx. The Charlotte native often recalled how the new interstates had destroyed "the connective tissue" of his grandparents' neighborhood, just as infrastructure projects had marginalized poor and minority neighborhoods in Baltimore, Miami and Los Angeles.

Texas's effort to tap $686 million in federal funding for the $1 billion project came as Foxx and other officials were trying to make amends for that history using civil rights law. The future of the bridge and port was put on hold until the complaint was resolved.

"That was the big leverage," Gaines said, given that the port touts itself as the fourth-largest in the United States by tonnage and the top exporter of crude oil.

The complaint was filed in March, and by Christmas 2015 a deal had been struck in near-record time: Texas transportation officials agreed to offer Porter and her neighbors voluntary buyouts to vacate the polluted industrial zone they call home. And they would subsidize rent for a few years for tenants, who make up more than half of Hillcrest's population, who chose to move out.

The terms were far more favorable to residents than in a typical project, where the government might seize land and homes through eminent domain. In Hillcrest, officials offered to relocate much of the neighborhood. Hundreds of families were eligible.

their neighborhoods, even if the homes cost several times more.

Washington signed off on the bridge. The relocation program would cost $45 million if 70 percent of those eligible were to take part, Texas transportation officials said. Funding would come from the state, a regional planning organization and the port authority, a Texas entity supported by industry.

The milestone agreement was to begin within months.

Instead, a sticking point emerged that stalled progress for another year: Should Hillcrest's undocumented immigrants receive the same generous terms as legal residents?

As the 2016 presidential campaign rolled on, with its passionate and polarizing debate over immigration, federal and state officials sparred over the rights of the undocumented people living in Hillcrest.

Those residents were included in the deal, argued federal officials who cited Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin in any program receiving federal funding.

No, argued state officials, they were barred from the deal by the federal Uniform Act, which specifically excludes "an alien not lawfully present" from receiving relocation assistance.

On Jan. 18, two days before the end of the Obama presidency, the Federal Highway Administration declared that Texas was not in compliance — and threatened to withhold the $686 million from the project.

"For the Obama Administration to go back on their approval agreement and try to force TxDOT to break the law by paying benefits to illegal aliens is unconscionable," Rep. Blake Farenthold (R-Tex.), who represents Corpus Christi, said in a statement.

sought help from President Trump's team.

"We just made a couple of calls," he said. The gist was: "Hey, this is hung up. What do we need to do to get it moving again?"

"It worked," he said.

The Obama-era legal interpretation was jettisoned. Undocumented immigrants would not receive the relocation buyout or other benefits. A top federal highway official signed Texas's write-up of the renegotiated agreement (http://goo.gl/X5B2ds) Feb. 3.

How was a new solution negotiated less than two weeks after Trump's inauguration?

A Farenthold aide pointed to conversations between the congressman's office and transition officials, including those with the Justice Department, which provides guidance on civil rights issues to other agencies. The White House referred questions to a Justice spokeswoman, who did not provide answers.

In response to questions, the Transportation Department said in a statement, "We believe this case demonstrates the [Federal Highway Administration's] commitment to ensuring that civil rights protections are enforced." The statement continued: "Secretary [Elaine] Chao did not play a role in this matter."

No undocumented immigrants have been publicly vocal about being excluded. One homeowner who is here illegally declined to discuss the policy when a reporter visited Hillcrest.

Port officials said their research indicated that only a handful of undocumented immigrants would be affected by the carve-out. Community organizers and Texas lawyers, including those who filed the civil rights complaint, said they had not received requests for help.

That may indicate that people have gone underground. The Trump administration's tougher immigration enforcement and the state's new law permitting local police to

Furniss, a lawyer for the Texas immigrant rights group Raices. The message being received, he said, is: “Come forward at your own risk.”

Farenthold praised the new approach. “Trump has a huge commitment to infrastructure,” the congressman said in the interview, “and doesn’t hate Texas.”

Transportation projects are about more than transportation. They’re about jobs, communities and people, and how they all get stitched together — or pulled apart.

The president has proposed overhauling how the nation weighs competing interests in building its infrastructure and argues that permitting requirements are shackling ingenuity and growth. The plodding and expensive process is “a massive self-inflicted wound on our country,” he said in August at Trump Tower in New York.

Trump has proposed cutting the Environmental Protection Agency’s budget by 31 percent, targeting environmental justice, enforcement and other areas, and he says studies on the impact of projects can be reduced to “a few simple pages.”

But without those protections, advocates argue, the poor and disenfranchised may lose rights in the name of progress.

The Washington Post

Politics

EPA plans to repeal emission standards for truck components

By Juliet Eilperin October 23 at 3:17 PM

The Environmental Protection Agency is seeking to repeal tighter emissions standards for truck components, a rule adopted in the final months of the Obama administration aimed at controlling traditional air pollutants as well as greenhouse-gas emissions linked to climate change.

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, who privately met in May with the manufacturer that stands to benefit most from the rule's repeal, suggested in August that he would reexamine the rule "in light of the significant issues raised" and see whether it is consistent with the agency's authority under the Clean Air Act.

The Office of Management and Budget has posted a notice saying that on Saturday it received the proposal to rescind the rule. Asked about the regulation, EPA spokesman Michael Abboud said in an email, "EPA does not comment on items under interagency review."

Unlike some Obama-era regulations, the rule, which is scheduled to take effect Jan. 1, has been widely embraced by the trucking industry.

The rule applies the standards now used for heavy-duty trucks to new truck components called gliders and trailers. A glider, or body, is the front of a truck, including the cab, which fits over the engine. Trailers are the storage components that make up most of the length of a truck.

Trucking companies can install an outdated engine into a new truck body and avoid regulations that would apply to an entirely new truck. Engine manufacturers and public health advocates are in favor of closing that loophole and applying pollution controls uniformly. Heavy-duty trucks have faced tighter emissions standards since 2004, though they have become more stringent over time, thereby widening the gap between new ones and truck bodies that contain older engines.

On Sept. 11, executives from three major heavy-truck and engine manufacturers — Volvo Group North America, Cummins and Navistar — wrote Pruitt urging him not to reopen the rule. It noted that the three companies were joining with the Truck

and Engine Manufacturers Association, the American Trucking Associations and the Truck Rental and Leasing Association in "voicing their concerns" about the move.

Glider kits, the three companies argued in their letter, "should not be used for circumventing purchase of currently certified power trains."

Pruitt met at EPA headquarters on May 8 with officials from Fitzgerald Truck Sales , the nation's largest manufacturer of gliders, according to his schedule . Officials from the company, which has lobbied to repeal the rule, did not respond to a call requesting comment.

When the rule was issued last fall, the EPA estimated that gliders and trailers using engines manufactured before 2002 produced emissions that were 20 to 40 times as high as those of trucks built today. In addition to greenhouse gases, exhaust from these heavy-duty trucks contains more nitrogen oxide, a component in smog, as well as fine particulate matter, or soot.

"They don't have modern pollution controls on them," said Paul Billings, senior vice president for advocacy at the American Lung Association. "This is like a straight pipe."

The agency estimated that requiring new gliders and trailers to be used with modern engines in 2017 alone would prevent between 350 and 1,600 premature deaths over the lifetime of these vehicles, since soot and other air pollutants contribute to lung and heart disease.

The nitrogen oxide and soot that would continue to be released if the glider rule was eliminated would be equivalent to repealing the most recent carbon rules for cars and light trucks or existing power plants, according to EPA analyses.

In his statement in August, Pruitt said the agency intends "to initiate a rulemaking process that incorporates the latest technical data and is wholly consistent with our authority under the Clean Air Act."

But Frank O'Donnell, president of the advocacy group Clean Air Watch, said the EPA had used up-to-date data to fashion a rule that ensured all the major truck manufacturers were on a level playing field.

"Now, this would reinstate a loophole that would essentially go back to dirty old engines in a new frame," O'Donnell said.

Juliet Eilperin is The Washington Post's senior national affairs correspondent, covering how the new administration is transforming a range of U.S. policies and the federal government itself. She is the author of two books—one on sharks, and another on Congress, not to be confused with each other—and has worked for the Post since 1998. Follow @eilperin

REMARKS

Houston Could Learn Something From Austin About Managing Stormwater

October 23, 2017, 10:42 AM CDT

The capital city wants to make sure that rain gets absorbed where it falls.

By Peter Coy

Austin is already ahead of Houston in its approach to stormwater runoff, and it may be about to extend its lead. The Texas capital is working on a rewrite <https://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Watershed/watershed_ordinance/GIWG_Beneficial_Use_5_12_2017.pdf> of its building code that, if passed by the city council next year, would require that most rain be absorbed where it falls instead of running off and causing problems elsewhere.

Letting rain soak in where it falls has two advantages, says a report <https://environmenttexas.org/reports/txe/growing-greener> released Monday by three nonprofit groups. First, it lessens flooding. Second, it reduces the pollution of streams that

results when stormwater runoff picks up pollutants from parking lots, roads, and other surfaces. Rain that soaks into the ground is naturally cleansed by the soil, plant roots, and organisms as it percolates into the water table.

The latest draft of Austin's new code strengthens the city's rules for stormwater, which originated in the 1990s <http://twri.tamu.edu/docs/funding/usgs/2006-07/karvonen_report.pdf> with a citywide effort to protect the water quality of a beloved swimming hole known as the Barton Springs Pool.

Here's what Brian Zabcik, a clean water advocate at Environment Texas, one of the organizations behind the new report, wrote in an email:

"A new provision in the Water Quality section will require new developments and redevelopments to retain a minimum amount of stormwater onsite by using green infrastructure. The minimum amount is defined as the amount of rainfall in 95% of all storms. In practical terms, this will translate into retaining from a half-inch to one-and-a-quarter inches of rain, depending on the amount of impervious cover on the property. The current code only requires developments to detain and filter pollutants out of stormwater, which can then be drained off-site. Retention means that features have to allow the water to soak into the ground, evaporate into the air, be absorbed into plants, or be stored in tanks for later on-site building use."

Contrast Austin with Houston, its larger neighbor to the east, where pell-mell growth exacerbated the flooding that occurred in August. No amount of good planning would have prevented Houston from suffering mightily when Hurricane Harvey struck the Gulf Coast and then hung around as a tropical storm, dumping a year's worth of rainfall in a few days. But experts said Houston had made itself more vulnerable

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-08-31/a-hard-rain-and-a-hard-lesson-for-houston> by paving over vast stretches of land, leaving the water with nowhere to go except into people's homes.

In September, Environment Texas released <https://environmenttexascenter.org/reports/txe/texas-stormwater-scorecard> a Texas Stormwater Scorecard of the state's biggest cities that gave Austin the highest grade, 90 percent, followed by San Antonio, 65 percent; Fort Worth, 60 percent; Houston, 50 percent; and Dallas, 40 percent. It cited Houston's "longstanding preference for gray stormwater infrastructure"—the gray referring to concrete, as in dams and sluices, as opposed to green, as in vegetation.

Austin's new code covers more than stormwater. It would promote denser development close to downtown and discourage sprawl. While that might be good for the environment, it's unpopular with some Austin residents who fear that building up rather than out would destroy the character of the city, whose unconventional motto is Keep Austin Weird. So the stormwater rules could fall victim if the city council rejects the overall code. One purpose of the report by Environment Texas and others is to build support for the proposed code.

Here's why SAWS rate increases are necessary

Express-News Editorial Board | October 23, 2017

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No one likes rate increases. But here's the tough reality for San Antonio Water System ratepayers: The rate increases are paying for the sins of the past as well as our future water security.

Photo: TOM REEL /

SAWS CEO Robert Puente (right) joins in a drink of clean water emerging from the plant as Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy visits the Dos Rios Water and Recycling Center and Centennial Solar Farms with Mayor Julian Castro in 2014. Rate hikes are necessary because the EPA and SAWS have agreed to a $500 million in infrastructure improvments that the city failed to do earlier.

Under an Environmental Protection Agency consent decree, SAWS is required to invest $500 million in additional infrastructure improvements to fix sewage leaks across the system. Much of the rate increases the public has experienced in recent years is tied to this work. This includes proposed rate increases of 5.8 percent in 2018 and 4.7 percent in 2019.

It's needed because throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, SAWS didn't sufficiently address infrastructure for sewage, officials have said. Yes, this kept rates low, and now we are all paying for it.

"In hindsight, we were really deferring renewals of our system," SAWS' Chief Operating Officer Steve Clouse recently told City Council.

We can't opt out of the consent decree. It's a requirement. At this point, so is sticking with Vista Ridge. Yes, it's a divisive point in the community. But the ship has sailed. The project is under construction.

OPINION

Education is more than avoiding offense

In 2020, SAWS will likely propose a whopping 12.4 percent rate increase. That's when water from the 142-mile Vista Ridge pipeline will arrive in San Antonio. There is no turning back from Vista Ridge — and if city officials did abandon the project, they would still need to embrace a comparable replacement.

Congress is allowing CHIP to die; it mustn't

Your Turn: Oct. 24

Here's why SAWS rate increases are necessary

This is the price of water security. San Antonio Water System recently said it has an "abundant" water supply for the next 50 years. That's partly thanks to Vista Ridge, which will deliver 50,000 acre-feet of water a year in 2020. It's also remarkable given the projected growth for the region: 1 million more residents by 2040.

City Councilmen Greg Brockhouse and Clayton Perry have expressed the strongest reservations about rate increases. Perry said he is a no vote — unless somehow convinced otherwise. Brockhouse has been a bit more nuanced, saying he supports the sewage infrastructure, but wants to see cuts in other areas. We certainly can understand the political calculus of voting no on these proposed rate increases, but it would be irresponsible to undercut the consent decree or Vista Ridge.

A more productive and responsible approach would be to press SAWS to broaden and expand its assistance to low-income ratepayers. These would be families most affected by a spike in their

water bills. Council should also insist on addtional water conservation programs, which would save water and help lower bills.

But there's another factor here: Tone deafness. President and CEO Robert Puente recently received a 5 percent raise and his total compensation, including a bonus, is about $567,000.

We are generally supportive of Puente's stewardship of SAWS, but, as we've noted previously, his pay puts him pretty much in line with San Antonio City Manager Sheryl Sculley, whose compensation is an endless flash point in the community, but whose job running a major city is significantly more complex. Puente's salary also dwarfs those in similar jobs in Austin, El Paso and Dallas by hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Puente has a tough job and a pay cut would not negate the need for a rate increase, but it's the principle. To pay the head of SAWS so much, especially at a time when ratepayers are taking on more cost, doesn't send the right message.

TEXAS

GAO: Climate change already costing US billions in losses

Associated Press

OCTOBER 23, 2017 10:12 PM

WASHINGTON — A non-partisan federal watchdog says climate change is already costing U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars each year, with those costs expected to rise as devastating storms, floods, wildfires and droughts become more frequent in the coming decades.

A Government Accountability Office report released Monday said the federal government has spent more than $350 billion over the last decade on disaster assistance programs and losses from flood and crop insurance. That tally does not include the massive toll from this year's three major hurricanes and wildfires, expected to be among the most costly in the nation's history.

The report predicts these costs will only grow in the future, potentially reaching a budget busting $35 billion a year by 2050. The report says the federal government doesn't effectively plan for these recurring costs, classifying the financial exposure from climate-related costs as "high risk."

"The federal government has not undertaken strategic government-wide planning to manage climate risks by using information on the potential economic effects of climate change to identify significant risks and craft appropriate federal responses," the study said. "By using such information, the federal government could take the initial step in establishing government-wide priorities to manage such risks."

GAO undertook the study following a request from Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources.

"This nonpartisan GAO report Senator Cantwell and I requested contains astonishing numbers about the consequences of climate change for our economy and for the federal budget in particular," said Collins. "In Maine, our economy is inextricably linked to the environment. We are experiencing a real change in the sea life, which has serious implications for the livelihoods of many people across our state, including those who work in our iconic lobster industry."

The report's authors reviewed 30 government and academic studies examining the national and regional impacts of climate change. They also interviewed 28 experts familiar with the strengths and limitations of the studies, which rely on future projections of climate impacts to estimate likely costs.

The report says the fiscal impacts of climate change are likely to vary widely by region. The Southeast is at increased risk because of coastal property that could be swamped by storm surge and sea level rise. The Northeast is also under threat from storm surge and sea level rise, though

not as much as the Southeast.

The Midwest and Great Plains are susceptible to decreased crop yields, the report said. The west is expected to see increased drought, wildfires and deadly heatwaves.

Advance copies were provided to the White House and the Environmental Protection Agency, which provided no official comments for inclusion in the GAO report.

Requests for comment from The Associated Press also received no response on Monday.

President Donald Trump has called climate change a hoax, announcing his intent to withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accords and revoke Obama-era initiatives to curb greenhouse gas emissions. Trump has also appointed officials such as EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, Energy Secretary Rick Perry and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, all of whom question the scientific consensus that carbon released into the atmosphere from burning fossil fuels is the primary driver of global warming.

Earlier this month Trump nominated Kathleen Hartnett White of Texas to serve as his top environmental adviser at the White House. She has credited the fossil fuel industry with "vastly improved living conditions across the world" and likened the work of mainstream climate scientists to "the dogmatic claims of ideologues and clerics."

White, who works at a conservative think tank that has received funding from fossil-fuel companies, holds academic degrees in East Asian studies and comparative literature.

—

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Digging In The Mud To See What Toxic Substances Were Spread By Hurricane Harvey

By REBECCA HERSHER (/PEOPLE/REBECCA-HERSHER) • 23 HOURS AGO

(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/shared/npr/styles/x_large/nprshared/201710/558763452.jpg)

Lindsay Cristides, a master's student in oceanography at Texas A&M University, anchors a research vessel in the Houston Ship Channel before taking samples of sediment left behind by Hurricane Harvey floods. The samples will be tested for contaminants including heavy metals.

REBECCA HERSHER / NPR

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Originally published on October 23, 2017 1:56 pm

The floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey had to go somewhere.

The storm dumped 50 inches of rain (http://www.npr.org/2017/08/31/547575113/three-reasons-houston-was-a-sitting-duck-for-harvey-flooding) on parts of the Houston area in late August. Much of the water made its way through streets and bayous (http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/27/546545122/photos-houston-flood-caused-by-harvey-sends-residents-scrambling-for-safety) and eventually drained into the Houston Ship Channel, the busy commercial waterway that allows ships to travel between the Gulf of Mexico and industrial facilities around Houston.

In the weeks since, the water has drained away, but scientists believe many of the contaminants it carried have not.

"The Port of Houston (http://porthouston.com/portweb/wp-content/uploads/September-Port-Commission-Mtg-_-2017-FINAL-003.pdf) is saying they had up to 10 feet of storm layer deposited in the ship channel," explains Tim Dellapenna (http://www.tamug.edu/mars/Faculty%20Biographies/TimothyMDellapenna.html) of Texas A&M University, Galveston, who is studying the so-called storm layer of sediment that Harvey left in the bottom of the channel.

Sediment can tell scientists a lot about a flood — contaminants get trapped in the mud, and the very amount of mud and sand can reveal things about how the storm played out.

"We're actually going to try to do a full screening for dioxins, heavy metals, polyaromatic hydrocarbons," Dellapenna explains. Mercury is a heavy metal. Polyaromatic hydrocarbons are often released by petrochemical operations, like the ones that line the ship channel.

Dioxins, in this case, could come from a Superfund toxic waste site nearby. The San Jacinto Waste Pits upstream flooded during the storm (http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/09/04/548490643/in-texas-concerns-about-damage-to-flooded-toxic-waste-sites), and the Environmental Protection Agency says dioxins may have washed into the channel.

Last week, the EPA announced a plan (https://www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwp) to remove nearly 212,000 cubic yards of contaminated material from the pits to prevent future contamination from floods.

Dellapenna's team also plans to compare contaminants in the new layer with those found in previous studies of the mud in the channel. For example, they'll specifically screen for mercury, in part because previous work (http://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/156881) by a doctoral student working with Dellapenna found elevated levels of mercury in the channel mud.

Other toxicology and environmental science teams from Texas A&M as well as Rice University and the University of Houston have also been testing sediment left by the storm, focusing on parts of the city such as Buffalo Bayou, which runs through downtown Houston, and residential areas that were flooded.

In the Houston Ship Channel, the amount of sediment deposited can also reveal the scale of the storm. The channel is the dredged upper part of Galveston Bay, and it's usually slightly salty. Harvey caused such severe flooding that the freshwater flowing into the ship channel pushed the leading edge of the salty water out toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Usually, where the salty water begins, the sediment carried by freshwater ends, so looking at the sand left behind in the ship channel can help scientists understand how far out that so-called salt wedge was pushed.

"What we're learning just from today is this is pretty sandy," Dellapenna says, referring to a sediment sample taken from midway up the channel near the Houston suburb of Baytown. "That means the salt wedge had to be pushed down further into the bay."

Taking samples in the Houston Ship Channel can be challenging. The process requires anchoring the small research boat with vertical poles and then using a combination of winches, special coring equipment and muscle to sink hollow tubes into the mud below.

"All the barges and tugboats go through there. So just getting to each site will be time-consuming because you have to dodge ships," says Lindsay Critides, an oceanography graduate student at Texas A&M, referring to the enormous oil tankers and other vessels that pass each other in the channel. "We're more maneuverable than they are, so we have to get out of the way."

Plus, the newly deposited sediment can be soupy, which makes it more likely to run out of the tubes before they can be pulled back onboard.

But after a full day of work last week, the team succeeded in collecting a handful of samples. They showed about 6 inches of sandy mud left behind by Harvey in a part of the channel. Toxicologists at Texas A&M expect to have results from screening the sediment for contaminants by February. In addition to publishing their results in academic journals, they plan to share them with a range of health officials to help them plan for future disasters.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

When Hurricane Harvey dumped 50 inches of rain on Houston, the floodwater a drain somewhere. Much of it went to the Houston Ship Channel, and it brought along a lot of contamination. Now scientists are sampling the channel mud to find what toxins were left behind. NPR's Rebecca Hersher reports.

REBECCA HERSHER, BYLINE: Lindsay Critides is kneeling on the deck of a small, beat-up research boat improbably nicknamed Big Daddy. It's 8 a.m. and the oceanography master's student is trying to fix a winch before the team heads out.

LINDSAY CRITIDES: I grabbed the T Allen wrenches, both sizes that would work.

HERSHER: They have to get everything ready before they leave the dock. The Houston Ship Channel is a really busy waterway. It's part of one of the biggest ports in the country. And this morning, barges and tanker ships are already passing each other in the wide, calm channel on their way to and from oil refineries.

TIM DELLAPENNA: Right here. This toolbox right here.

HERSHER: Tim Dellapenna is an associate professor of marine science and oceanography at Texas A&M. He's leading this expedition today, and he says after Harvey, a lot of mud ended up in this channel.

DELLAPENNA: The Port of Houston's saying that they had up to 10 feet of storm layer deposited in the ship channel. And then I - that had us going, well, we need to go up there and sample that as soon as we can. And that's why we're here.

HERSHER: The plan is to go to shallower parts of the channel and use winches and straight-up muscle to sink long tubes down into the mud then compare what's in the different layers. They think they might find pollution from things upstream.

DELLAPENNA: And, specifically, we're downstream from where the big dioxin pits are for the Superfund site.

HERSHER: That's the San Jacinto Waste Pits Superfund site, contaminated with toxic dioxin since the 1960s. It's already polluted the channel before, and now they're worried Harvey has made things worse. And it's not just old industrial sites. Some of the largest petrochemical facilities in the world line the channel. Many of them were affected by the storm.

DELLAPENNA: We're actually going to do a full screening for dioxins, heavy metals, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, called PAHs.

HERSHER: There are houses along the channel, too, which is one reason contamination here is a public health issue. People live here.

DELLAPENNA: OK.

HERSHER: The actual sampling is harder than it sounds. Their little boat has to dodge enormous ships.

CRITIDES: We're going to go a little faster.

HERSHER: And the team is concerned that the new sediment layer might be too soupy to stay in the tubes. They stop to take a sample in a shallow area surrounded by active oil wells.

DELLAPENNA: Ready? OK. Dellapenna and Critides lean over the side of the boat and sink a clear plastic tube deep into the mud.

CRITIDES: This mud is pretty soft.

DELLAPENNA: Is it coming? Yeah, it's coming. OK. You're good.

CRITIDES: Wow. Look at that. It's pretty.

DELLAPENNA: This is the storm layer right here, the light-colored stuff. That's still oxidized. That's the flood layer that we have here in this core.

HERSHER: The sandy mud left by Hurricane Harvey is about 6 inches deep here. Critides saws off the extra end of the tube, labels it, and the team moves on to the next area, making their way up the ship channel. At the end of the day five of these teams will go back to Galveston, where they'll be divided up and toxicologists will start analyzing what's in the layers. The whole process will take a few months. Rebecca Hersher, NPR News.

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HURRICANE HARVEY

Digging In The Mud To See What Toxic Substances Were Spre By Hurricane Harvey

Hurricane Harvey dumped 50 inches of rain on parts of Houston. Scientists are now trying to identify contamina spread by the storm, including those in mud at the bottom of the Houston Ship Channel

REBECCA HERSHER, NPR | OCTOBER 23, 2017, 3:20 PM

Rebecca Hersher/NPR

Lindsay Cristides, a master's student in oceanography at Texas A&M University, anchors a research vessel in the Houston Ship Channel before taking samples of sedim behind by Hurricane Harvey floods. The samples will be tested for contaminants including heavy metals.

The floodwaters from Hurricane Harvey had to go somewhere.

The storm dumped 50 inches of rain on parts of the Houston area in late August. Much of the water made its way through streets and bay eventually drained into the Houston Ship Channel, the busy commercial waterway that allows ships to travel between the Gulf of Mexico a industrial facilities around Houston.

In the weeks since, the water has drained away, but scientists believe many of the contaminants it carried have not.

"The Port of Houston is saying they had up to 10 feet of storm layer deposited in the ship channel," explains Tim Dellapenna of Texas A&I University, Galveston, who is studying the so-called storm layer of sediment that Harvey left in the bottom of the channel.

Thomas B. Shea/AFP/Getty Images

Water rises in the Houston Ship Channel on Aug. 27. Some of the largest oil refineries in the world line the channel, which connects Houston to the Gulf of Mexico.

Sediment can tell scientists a lot about a flood — contaminants get trapped in the mud, and the very amount of mud and sand can reveal about how the storm played out.

“We’re actually going to try to do a full screening for dioxins, heavy metals, polyaromatic hydrocarbons,” Dellapenna explains. Mercury is metal. Polyaromatic hydrocarbons are often released by petrochemical operations, like the ones that line the ship channel.

Dioxins, in this case, could come from a Superfund toxic waste site nearby. The San Jacinto Waste Pits upstream flooded during the sto the Environmental Protection Agency said dioxins may have washed into the channel.

Last week, the EPA announced a plan to remove nearly 212,000 cubic yards of contaminated material from the pits to prevent future contamination from floods.

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Rebecca Hersher/NPR

A core sample of mud from the bottom of the Houston Ship Channel. The lightest layer at the top of the tube is about 6 inches of sandy sediment left by the floods after Hu Harvey.

Taking samples in the Houston Ship Channel can be challenging. The process requires anchoring the small research boat with vertical po then using a combination of winches, special coring equipment and muscle to sink hollow tubes into the mud below.

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has awarded the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma more than $282,000 to curb water pollution.

Oct. 23, 2017, at 12:23 p.m.

AP

McLOUD, Okla. (AP) — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has awarded the Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma (/news/best-states/oklahoma) more than $282,000 to curb water pollution.

The McLoud-based tribe will use the grant to control surface and groundwater pollution and establish protection programs that address indoor air, underground storage tanks and solid and hazardous waste management.

The federal agency says the grant can be applied to different programs and can be used to remedy cost-cutting measures.

The EPA says performance partnership grants provide financial aid to states and tribes and allows recipients to use the awards with greater flexibility for priority environmental problems or program needs.

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Lord & Taylor's flagship store in Manhattan is being sold for $850 million to WeWork, the office space sharing company.

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Washington State University is announcing big budget cuts to reduce an estimated $30 million annual deficit.

Panel Set to Give 'A Man's Point of View' on Women Canceled (https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-jersey/articles/2017-10-24/magazine-cancels-all-male-womens-empowerment-panel?int=news-rec)

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A New Jersey-based magazine owned by women has canceled a women's empowerment panel following criticism because the participants were all men.

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Nine of the state's 11 district attorneys are taking issue with several provisions of a massive criminal justice bill expected to be debated by the Massachusetts Senate later this week.

Former Daniel Webster College Campus Sold for Nearly $12M (https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/new-hampshire/articles/2017-10-24/former-daniel-webster-college-campus-sold-for-nearly-12m?int=news-rec)

Oct. 24, 2017

The former Daniel Webster College campus in Nashua, New Hampshire, has been sold for nearly $12 million to a buyer whose name hasn't been released.

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The Empire Strikes Back: Monsanto Sues Arkansas Over Dicamba Restrictions; Meanwhile, the EPA Gives Farmers the Green Light to Use New Dicamba Formulation

By KJ McElrath - October 23, 2017

Less than a month after the Arkansas Plant board approved a proposal to institute an annual five-month ban on the use of dicamba effective next April, Monsanto has filed a lawsuit in Pulaski County Circuit Court, seeking an injunction against enforcement of the new rule. Coincidentally, this lawsuit was filed only a week after the EPA announced that it will continue to allow farmers to use the controversial herbicide on Monsanto's new dicamba-resistant GMO cotton and soybeans. According to Monsanto's complaint,

"*The Plant Board's arbitrary approach also has deprived, and if left unchecked will continue to deprive, Arkansas farmers of the best weed management tools available – tools that are available to farmers in every other soybean- and cotton-producing state in the nation*."

The EPA's decision comes as welcome news to Monsanto and farmers eager to implement the company's latest technology. However, it is a slap in the face for hundreds of other farmers and conservationists who filed a federal lawsuit back in January over concerns of dicamba's link to cancer and birth defects as well as the chemical's volatility, which has resulted in the destruction of nearby non-GMO crops.

In a weak attempt to placate organic farmers and environmentalists, the EPA has attached a few "strings": farmers planning to use dicamba will be required to go through special training, will not be allowed to spray if the wind speed is greater than 10 miles per hour, and are being asked to be "more aware" of possible damage to neighboring fields and orchards.

Those EPA restrictions mean very little. They fail to address the root of the problem, which is the volatile nature of dicamba. Essentially, the chemical evaporates from the fields where it is sprayed – and can drift anywhere, in any direction. In fact, the state of Missouri imposed the same restrictions last year, but dicamba spraying still caused massive amounts of crop damage.

The EPA decision may very well mean that more farmers will feel forced to purchase Monsanto's dicamba-resistant seeds next year. This possibility is not lost on Monsanto's vice-president of global strategy, Scott Partridge, who projects sales to double in 2018. "The demand for it is overwhelming," he says. "The need to control these difficult-to-manage weeds is huge."

That is only going to make the problem worse – which is convenient for Monsanto and its bottom line. While Monsanto's chemical sprays offer a short-term fix for weed control, the long-term result is the evolution of herbicide-resistant "superweeds." This, in turn, leads to even *more* spraying and *more* and different formulations…and coincidentally, even more sales and profits for Monsanto.

So don't expect any help from Monsanto's bought-and-paid-for handmaidens at the EPA.

KJ McElrath